

## Garland Jeffreys Truth Serum

by Peter Stone Brown

For more than four decades Garland Jeffreys has been playing, writing, performing, always close to the top, but somehow remaining the invisible man who never gets inside, or when he does get inside, he remains invisible. Maybe it's because he's half black and half Puerto Rican and all American and he sings about it.

From his earliest records, Jeffreys mixed up various genres of American music, early rock 'n' roll and doo wop, R&B and soul, blues, reggae, harder rock with a Velvet Underground edge, Dylan and The Band, and folk music sliding through and combining it all in a way that seemed effortless. No wonder the various major labels he recorded for never knew what to do with him.

On top of it all, Jeffreys is a writer. This was made clear by the title of his second solo album and his masterpiece, *Ghost Writer*, released 36 years ago. Jeffreys is a poet and he has a poet's appreciation of language. He knows how to take a word or a phrase and repeat it in a way that let's the word's natural rhythm do its work. Like Bob Dylan, he knows how to take a common phrase or cliché and turn it around and use it for his own purposes in a way that makes you forget it was a cliché to begin with.

Jeffreys has a message but he never hits you over the head with it or resorts to rhetoric even when he repeats the same line endlessly. Instead he alternate between gentle probing suggestion and then hitting you with a line that is so sarcastically biting, you feel like you've been knocked to the ground. He manages to pull this trick off without bitterness and also without resignation, but hovering somewhere in the background is the question: when are we going to finally stop being so stupid?

Two years ago, Jeffreys emerged after a 13-year recording hiatus with *The King of In Between* released on his own label, Luna Park. It showed that no matter what Jeffreys was doing during that time, his songwriting and performing gifts were still intact. The album covered several topics and themes including life in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century American economic depression, continuing in the face of old age and all that comes with it, black/white relations and Jeffreys' love of his hometown, New York City and his love of music. Most of all, it was a rallying call to live, live in the face of innumerable obstacles, difficulties and frustrations, but live nonetheless. As far as this writer is concerned, it was *the* album of 2011.

Now at age 70, Jeffreys is back with a new album *Truth Serum* (Luna Park) and he's rocking as hard as he ever did.

The album starts out with the title track, which is perhaps the hardest blues he's ever recorded with Duke Levine on slide, guitar, Larry Campbell on lead and Brian Mitchell on harmonica, with a sound that is right from the Muddy Waters trick book. Jeffreys gets to the heart of the song on the third verse:

*Lies, lies, lies, lies, lies  
Lie, lies, lies, lies and alibis  
Still don't hear no truth  
Lies and honesty  
Take your choice  
Your voice in the voting booth*

Jeffreys then switches gears to a moderate paced rocker, "Any Rain," which also was the first video release from the album. The song starts with these lines:

*Suffering is optional  
I heard a wise man say  
You can live in violence  
Or you can make it fade away*

and then after a chorus continues with:

*Tears are runnin' all down my face  
But only for a little while  
I was thinkin' about the human race  
And wishin' we could reconcile  
Live and let live is it too much to ask  
Or would you rather it fall apart  
Ceremonials in the trash  
In a world of broken hearts*

Again the guitar work by Campbell and Levine is above and beyond, while the entire sound of the band perfectly complements the song.

Things slow down slightly for the next song, the acoustic-based "It's What I Am" which has a soulful groove reminiscent of Van Morrison, Jeffreys sums up his situation with the line, "Too white to be black, too black to be white."

Early in his career, Jeffreys demonstrated an ability not only to be able to write reggae, but to use it to effectively make a point, and he does so again with “Dragons to Slay.” It’s all in Jeffreys’ voice, the arrangement, and knowing when to leave a lot to the power of suggestion, but Jeffreys takes these basic lines and makes them seem like not only much more, but perhaps a daily mantra:

*Dragons to slay  
Each and every day  
Each and every day  
Dragons to slay  
At work and when I’m out at play*

That same power of suggestion is retained for the next song, “Is This The Real World,” another gentle rocker that’s reminiscent of Springsteen, with a hint of doo wop that’s both dreamy and questioning, and ends with the line, “When you live in a world like this, something’s gotta pull you through.”

A finger-picked acoustic guitar and accordion are at the heart of “Ship Of Fools,” a song about trying to stay true when you’re surrounded by deceit.

A psychedelic guitar solo with more than a hint of Lou Reed kicks off “Crash The Generation,” the hardest rocker on the album and clearly a song to Jeffrey’s daughter. It’s all about the rhythm and the guitar sound and the way Jeffreys can chant the same line repeatedly, but make every line count and mean something different.

“Far Far Away,” starts slowly and builds like a slow surging wave continually gaining power and force. Like some of the other songs on the album, there’s a dreamy quality to it as Jeffreys sings about this world by instead singing about another perhaps better world made explicit by these lines:

*Come here steal my problems  
And take my worries too  
Put ‘em in your suitcase  
And take them home with you  
I’ve been waiting for this moment  
To put you on the line  
Where everything is happier  
And everyone is fine*

Again the mood Jeffreys sets is every bit as important as the lyrics.

"Colorblind Love" has kind of slinky guitars and a mysterious feel with hints of blues that Jeffreys has used effectively on previous albums. The power of the song has a lot to do with the way Jeffreys phrases the lines:

*Colorblind love  
It's what I been dreaming of  
Fits like a hand in glove  
Ain't no dream like colorblind love  
Better than hate  
The kind of love I just can't wait  
The kind of hate I can't relate  
Till it goes away forever and forever*

A light hint of reggae on acoustic guitar with a gently plucked banjo played perfectly by James Maddock kicks off "Revolution Of The Mind." This is where Jeffreys' artistic mastery is at its height. The feel of the song is casual, almost carefree, like a bright sleepy Sunday morning. The song is only a few lines with a chorus and one verse starting with these lines, "Everybody wants to feel things change/Everybody wants to see things be different," but in the way he chants revolution, over and over again, never shouting, never hard, he somehow manages to capture the dichotomy of America without ever mentioning it. Only a poet could pull that off.

Truth Serum is available at: <http://garlandjeffreys.com/> and other usual places including real record stores.

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